



WATER

Exploring Tidal Creeks

By Carolyn Sones
*North and South Rivers
Watershed Association*

At high tide the salt-water creek offers a meandering roadway to many inaccessible spots in the salt marsh — tidal pools, islands, secret fishing grounds and swimming holes. As the tide falls, the water in the creeks of the estuary empties out, leaving behind the low-tide world of oozing peat and mud. At low tide the creek traveler comes to a screeching halt. There is not enough water for even a shallow-draft boat, and walking becomes impossible in the mud.

When clamming and musseling were permitted, I spent a fair amount of time in this low-tide world. Lately I have been traveling on the water two hours before and after the high tide, allowing for plenty of water and smooth sailing. But recently, I set out in my kayak in order to answer the question, "Can one paddle in the creeks behind Tilden Island at low tide?" The answer is no, but I found that the low-tide world of the creek is definitely worth exploring.

Very few humans travel in these creeks at low tide. The creeks and exposed sand bars become a private, undisturbed sanctuary for birds and animals.

Mud is everywhere. Walls of peat rise above you. When pushed in to see what lies below, the paddle sinks beyond its blade. The banks are like a huge sponge being squeezed of every drop of water. The sound is that of water oozing, dripping and running off the marshes and out of the land.

The bank is a study in itself. It is dotted with holes of all sizes, providing housing for crabs, snails, lobsters and eels. The roots of the Spartina patens reach deep, holding the peat together. Algae hang from the banking like Spanish moss. Several varieties of seaweed grow along the upper edge or come to rest there as the water recedes, leaving flotillas of sea lettuce and kelp temporarily high and dry. The peat banks appear wet, slimy and slippery. In places, a chunk of bank has broken off — the beginning of a hummock. Occasionally, the remnants of an old wooden pier, boat or road protrude, piquing one's imagination about what was once there. Empty shells of clams and mussels as well as cast-off crab skins, all decaying, contribute to the familiar smell of low tide.

Many animals make their homes in this banking. Periwinkles, moon snails, green crabs and spider crabs slither and clamber amongst the cave-like holes. Marsh snails climb up blades of grass. Barnacles cling to the occasional rock. Driftwood harbors evidence of the tubes of keel worms. Digging a hole produces soft-shell clams, clam worms and ribbon worms (my favorites)! When the tide comes back in, the tubes, heads and legs of these bottom dwellers will appear on the surface of the muddy bottom. All of these mudflat creatures would probably go about their business whether my kayak and I had floated in or not.

Observing the skittish shorebird is a special treat for a lone human floating in this low-tide world. As I poled past one gutter completely drained of water, the striking white silhouettes of snowy and American egrets busied themselves feeding and pruning, feeling safe from intrusion in this hidden valley. A short-billed dowitcher needed the exposed flat in search of worms. Common and least terns hovered hummingbird-style and dove time and again into the small pool in a feeding frenzy. Greater yellowlegs and least sandpiper stalked the edges of small pools, unaware of my presence. Footprints were evidence of others feeding before them.

One final low-tide task. The map indicates a shipwreck: possible remnants of a rum-runner or World War II sub-chaser. Sure enough, just where the treasure should be there is a pile of submerged timbers, with possibly some casks of rum down below.

Moral of the story: Don't try to paddle around Tilden Island at low tide. Do spend time in the salt marsh and creeks at low tide. A world worth exploring lies beneath you as you skim along on the high tide, unaware.

Carolyn Sones of Humarock serves on the board of directors of the North and South Rivers Watershed Association.